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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SOFIA 000600

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SUBJECT: BULGARIA ROLLING OUT AMBITIOUS NEW MISSIONS IN
AFGHANISTAN

REF: A. SOFIA 483

[1](#)B. SOFIA 158

[1](#)C. SOFIA 140

[1](#)D. SOFIA 44

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires John Ordway for reasons 1.4 (b)/(d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Bulgarian Ministry of Defense is preparing to ramp up its contributions in Afghanistan. A new plan would consolidate nearly all of its forces in Afghanistan at Kandahar Airfield by April 2010 in order to take over complete responsibility for internal security of this critical transport hub. The additional troops required for this operation combined with a second Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT) and a new regional medical facility would bring Bulgaria's troop total to approximately 650. As an intermediate step, the 160 Bulgarian forces currently located around Kabul will be consolidated at the Kabul International Airport and assume responsibility for ground defense "outside the wire" as early as November 2009. This ambitious new plan represents a significant break from the previous two governments, policy of avoiding larger missions and accepting only smaller "odd jobs" assigned by NATO. The plan has the support of Ministry of Defense, but has not yet been approved by the Prime Minister or Council of Ministers. Defense Minister Mladenov will preview this new approach with Assistant Secretary of Defense Vershbow in Sofia on October 21 and will present to DOD and State in Washington during his October 29-30 visit. End Summary.

CURRENT CONFIGURATION OF BULGARIAN FORCES

[1](#)2. (C) Bulgaria has 472 troops serving in Afghanistan: 160 soldiers based at two separate facilities near Kabul International Airport, 270 soldiers at Kandahar International Airport, a five-person medical team embedded with the French in Kabul, a 10-person medical team embedded with the Spanish in Herat, and one joint OMLT with the Tennessee National Guard in Kandahar.

[1](#)3. (C) The current configuration poses many challenges for the Bulgarians as they are operating in three different regional commands and are embedded with three different allies. (Previously, this number has been as high as five.) Bulgarian soldiers are very enthusiastic about serving in Afghanistan and qualified volunteers for deployments far outnumber available slots. However, the Defense Staff notes the current arrangement limits the development of the Bulgarian military's command and control capacity, as its forces in Afghanistan are broken up into small units without autonomy or decision-making capacity. Also Bulgaria has often been forced to scramble to secure logistics, transport and sustainment support for its many far-flung contingents.

PHASE I: CONSOLIDATION AT KABUL

¶4. (C) In August 2009, the government authorized a consolidation at Camp Phoenix of all 160 Bulgarian soldiers in the Kabul area and took over responsibility for the defense of the 40 square kilometers outside the security perimeter north of Kabul International Airport. Previously, Bulgarian forces had been split between Camp Invicta (embedded with the Italians) and Camp Warehouse (embedded with the Germans). As of November 1 all Bulgarian forces in the area will be under Belgian Command (within the COMKATIA chain of authority) which is responsible for the overall defense of Kabul Airport.

¶5. (C) This initial consolidation is significant. It consolidates the Bulgarian forces in Kabul in preparation for a later consolidation of all Afghanistan-based Bulgarian forces at Kandahar. It exposes the Bulgarian forces to significantly more risk and requires much more active and complicated command and control on the part of Bulgarian officers than previous static missions guarding the internal perimeter of the base. This mission will also provide valuable experience for the Bulgarians and lay the groundwork for a similar mission outside Kandahar Airport once the second phase of consolidation is complete.

PHASE II: CONSOLIDATION AT KANDAHAR

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¶6. (C) Kandahar Airport is the largest NATO base in the world and a critical strategic and logistics hub. The Bulgarian force at Kandahar Airport (currently 270 soldiers) is responsible for internal security of the airport's perimeter, manning guard towers and an entry control point, and serving as a special reaction force. The Bulgarian Defense Staff has proposed to the Defense Minister that starting in April 2010, Bulgaria assume responsibility for the entire internal security mission at Kandahar Airfield. This would require consolidation of all Bulgarian troops in Afghanistan as well as an additional 70 troops, bringing total forces in country to at least 540.

¶7. (C) Looking forward, the Bulgarian Defense Staff has considered the possibility of volunteering to assume control of the ground defense mission outside the perimeter of Kandahar Airport. This would be a jump in responsibility, but the Bulgarians are interested in eventually moving beyond a static mission to a more active, patrolling mission. The ground defense mission outside Kandahar Airport is currently carried out by the UK Royal Air Force and involves not only patrols but interaction with local populations and counter-insurgency operations. The Bulgarians have discussed the mission with the UK forces, and have concluded that they do not currently possess the training or equipment to execute the mission and would require at least another 150 soldiers. The Defense Staff remains interested in this course of action, and has approached the embassy informally to see how we could assist.

¶8. (C) Comment: For a relatively poor country with a population smaller than New York City, Bulgaria's troop contributions are already a significant commitment. It still possesses the military capacity to send some additional soldiers, but even expenses such as combat bonuses are increasingly burdensome. Rather than focus on troop numbers, we have consistently urged the Bulgarians to consider larger, more ambitious missions in Afghanistan and to take a more active role in planning for future deployments. The new Minister of Defense, Nikolay Mladenov, has clearly taken this message to heart. He hopes the consolidation plan will increase the impact of Bulgarian troops in Afghanistan, and provide learning and transformational benefits for Bulgarian

soldiers as they transition into roles with more command and control responsibility. He plans to unveil this plan during his October 29-30 visit to Washington and believes it will demonstrate the new government's proactive approach to international security cooperation and its strong commitment to NATO and the war in Afghanistan.

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